

TESTIMONY OF KASSEY NEASON
Governor's Proposed FY 24 & FY 25 Budget

H.B. No. 6659 AN ACT CONCERNING THE STATE BUDGET FOR THE BIENNIUM ENDING JUNE 30, 2025, AND MAKING APPROPRIATIONS THEREFOR

My name is Kassey Neason. I am an independent living advocate for the Deaf Services program at Independence Northwest, one of CT's five independent living centers. We serve the northwestern corner of CT. I thank you for your past support of the Independent Living Centers (ILCs) and ask that you **increase funding for the ILCs by \$1M dollars, or more, annually.**

Independent living centers are frequently confused with assisted living. IL centers are disability resource and advocacy centers. We are non-residential, despite our name, and we serve people with ALL types of disabilities and of ALL ages. Our **only** eligibility criteria is having a disability. It doesn't matter if someone wants help with housing, employment, benefits, transportation, health care, education, assistive technology, recreation, family matters, or any other barrier they are facing. We assist consumers to navigate the myriad of services, programs and benefits that exist as "silos" in CT. We employ qualified people with disabilities who share our experiences and our path to independence, offering practical guidance because **we have lived it**. Increasing state Independent Living dollars ensures that our services remain free and that the ILCs can return to serving the entire state, reducing yet another barrier to achieving independence. The ILCs are the only place where people with disabilities can go when they can't afford, or are found ineligible, for other programs or their needs aren't addressed holistically.

On February 22nd, the Department on Aging and Disability Services' (ADS) Commissioner, Amy Porter, told this committee that the department is maintaining the independent living centers. Nothing could be further from the truth. Despite some increases over the last several years, the ILCs are still 35% behind inflation and previous cuts have never been fully restored. State funding for the ILCs was \$200K per CIL in the 1990s; now it's \$93K. The ILCs have been forced to cut back on the towns we serve, created waiting lists, laid-off staff members and reduced salaries. There is a huge demand and need for Housing Coordinators and additional Advocates, who could be ADS' proposed Community Ombudsmen. The ILCs have been getting people out of nursing facilities and diverting others from ever entering a nursing facility for over 25 years, but we can't keep up with the demand with our current level of funding. We need to expand to meet the growing needs of the disability community, not maintain.

Connecticut's fiscal health is the strongest it has been in a generation. Increasing funding by \$1M for the ILCs would begin to restore and support expansion of vital IL services to people with disabilities in every town and city in Connecticut.

The work we do is important. We have a positive impact on the lives of those we serve. I've assisted many consumers with vary of circumstances. Most of them have become successful with their goals with our help. Others are still using our services because they need our support. Without the services, they would not get to where they are right now.

I urge you to increase the funding for the ILCs by \$1M dollars, or more.

In closing, I want to thank you for your time, consideration, and support of our request for additional funding. It will help the services provided by the centers make a difference to help the individuals in the deaf community to live independently.

Kassey Neason

Respectfully Submitted by:
Kassey Neason
Independence Northwest, Inc.